**[Glimmer of hope](https://www.dawn.com/news/1422890/glimmer-of-hope)**

[S. Mudassir Ali Shah](https://www.dawn.com/authors/3527/s-mudassir-ali-shah)July 26, 2018

VICE PRESIDENT Abdul Rashid Dostum’s return on Sunday after 14 months in exile coincided with a deadly suicide bombing at Kabul International Airport. Despite the assault claimed by the militant Islamic State (IS) group, his reappearance is one of the positive developments Afghanistan has witnessed in recent weeks.

Days before his homecoming, thousands of Dostum’s supporters took to the streets in several northern provinces, including Jawzjan and Faryab. Protests in Dostum’s stronghold contributed to the hasty stitching up of a new deal between President Ashraf Ghani and his deputy.

Several presidential emissaries had air-dashed to Ankara to persuade the Uzbek leader, who pretended to be undergoing medical check-ups in Turkey, to come back. In fact, the veteran political actor was given a safe passage to keep him from being tried on a litany of charges.

Some months ago, he made a botched attempt to return home, but the aircraft carrying him was denied landing in Afghanistan. Subsequently, the plane touched down in Tajikistan, where he stayed for several days and planned to cross the border into Badakhshan. His absence from the country irked Junbish-i-Milli activists into stirring the streets and shutting down voter registration centres in some provinces.

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As political tensions mounted, the Ghani administration chose to pacify the angry protesters by speeding up negotiations with Dostum. The talks involving Second Vice President Sarwar Danish and other senior government figures yielded the desired result — return of the warlord.

To all appearances, his return was green-lighted by Ghani to promote political stability and reconciliation in a war-wracked country. Ironically, a number of people were killed and wounded in the airport attack moments after his motorcade left for the city centre.

The outsize clout of Dostum, who is linked to a catalogue of human rights abuses, was amply reflected by the security detail — a huge crowd of supporters and an array of senior officials greeted him after he disembarked from the chartered plane.

Ghani desperately needs to be on good terms with the vice president to bring calm to the strategic north and shore up support from the Uzbek community in next year’s presidential election. An ethnic Pakhtun, the president is likely to contest the vote. If backed by Dostum, his re-election bid will get a major boost.

Before Dostum can prop up the head of state, he will have to clear his own name. He stands accused of organising the rape and torture of a political rival. Seven of his bodyguards have already been convicted of the sexual assault and incarceration of Ahmad Ishchi, a former governor of Jawzjan.

Dostum still heads a large private militia and enjoys a big following of about four million Uzbek voters. To counter opposition from other northern political factions, the president will have to woo back a man he branded as a remorseless killer in 2009.

Meanwhile, the situation remains desperate. The Trump administration is now weighing the resumption of direct negotiations with the Taliban. A year after it was rolled out, the president’s South Asia strategy remains a non-starter. Donald Trump’s U-turn comes amid concerns that his current policy, including the deployment of several thousand more troops, have failed to reverse the Taliban’s momentum.

Although his mercurial temperament has made a hash of the US military mission in Afghanistan, Trump’s new approach is a welcome move towards a negotiated settlement. If sincerely pursued, the fledgling diplomatic initiative may lead to stabilising the country.

However characterised, the change of mood in Washington is a positive development. Even more hear­tening is Trump’s willingness to put on the table a timetable for US troop withdrawal — a long-stan­ding demand of the insurgent movement which can make common cause with Americans in undermining IS.

Reportedly, clandestine US-Taliban talks have already taken place in Afghanistan, Qatar and the UAE. The exploratory meetings, happening amid airtight security, have been billed by some participants as friendly, frank and constructive.

One big confidence-building measure will be the removal of Taliban leaders from a UN black list to enable them to travel. Kabul has been taken on board but it may not take kindly to face-to-face contacts between the US and the Afghan Taliban in the immediate term. It would like to decide itself on the Taliban’s role in the political process and protections for women.

Perceived as a reliable US partner, Ghani is pondering a longer ceasefire with the fighters during Eidul Adha — a suggestion spurred by last month’s truce. The three-day pause in hostilities indicated unity of command and a desire on all sides to wind down the war.

The writer is a freelance journalist based in Peshawar.

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